clear structure. The book is essentially by a scholar for scholars. The author’s emphasis on drawing from spiritual readings holds special significance in the context of modern organizations. The author needs to be congratulated for bringing out a valuable treatise on the subject close to his heart.

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The Search is not exactly the corporate history of Google, but offers one of the most complete histories of the search industry today. Author John Battelle was the founder of The Industry Standard and then one of the managing editors of Wired, two magazines which influence perceptions on the wide world of the Internet. Battelle clearly drew from his experience and contacts in writing this book. In addition to the accurate historical perspective and easy familiarity with such dot-com stalwarts as AltaVista, Lycos, and Excite, he flashes his narrative with conversational asides from a cast of fascinating characters, such as Google’s founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin, Yahoo’s Jerry Yang and David Filo, and numerous other insiders. Battelle has a penchant for penetrating the myths and legends that frequently surface as familiar anecdotes, prodding for details never found in press releases and rarely revealed by key players who know the true story.

The simple act of keying in a phrase to a search engine is carried out a billion times a day and provides an unprecedented map of human desires. The commercial ramifications are obvious, but our culture and our access to information are also being transformed by the nature of search. At the outset, Battelle specifically indicates his desire to understand what he calls the cultural anthropology of search, and to analyze search engines’ current role as the “database of our intentions” - the repository of humanity’s curiosity, exploration, and expressed desires. Although the beginning is interesting, Battelle’s story really picks up momentum when he starts dishing inside scoops on the business story of the decade—Google. Batelle presents the history of search, helping us understand how Google, a relatively late comer, has grown so quickly to dominate the field. To the extent possible
without being privy to the details, he takes us inside Google’s legendary
Page Rank algorithm - one of the most carefully guarded secrets since the
Coca Cola recipe was formulated.

He offers a very frank discussion on the difference between Google’s
public declarations and their business practices, while recognizing difficulties
of competing in the “big business league.” Battelle argues that Amazon,
eBay and even Microsoft may all be surpassed by Google as it develops
ever more intriguing and powerful search-based and related applications.
He contemplates search as the key to global commerce, bringing buyers
and sellers together worldwide. For now, though, search remains a huge
success story - Google may well be about to have its own stock bubble
popped, but the company is profitable and unlikely to be knocked off its
leadership perch by Wall Street alone. Yahoo and MSN are moving into the
contextual ad field, each looking to get the competitive edge to make
advertisers and publishers alike use their particular system. Most importantly,
all three are continually trying to find better ways to slice and dice the
“Database of Intentions” to give you what you want faster and simpler.
Google, to my mind, still stands out in front for innovation, constantly testing
business boundaries, putting the user experience first and working backwards.
In the last five years, it has continually gone its own way and managed to
take the industry with it. But Yahoo and MSN and, indeed, people and
companies we have never even heard of yet, are not to be underestimated.
John Battelle’s The Search provides a brilliant illustration that within five
years everything in the search world can undergo a sea change.

Other issues discussed include the extent to which Google is needed,
under the PATRIOT Act, to divulge information on those who search and
the case of Google’s manipulation of its News service to the People’s Republic
of China. Life is not easy at the top!

To Battelle’s credit, though, he doesn’t stop just with historical
retrospective: the final part of his book focuses on Google’s IPO (initial
public offering) and the potential future directions of Google. The IPO created
something of a furore, with its two classes of shareholders (basically, the
founders and the rest), which meant that Brin and Page would continue to
run the company because their shares were worth ten times the ordinary
shareholders. The founders also evaded the normal Wall Street mechanisms
for launching a public company by holding a Dutch auction for its shares
(i.e., the price requested is lowered from a start point until an acceptable bid is received).

With the realization that the potential of search has only just begun, there are real dangers ahead too. Ownership of personal information is the major concern, with some beginning to see the likes of Google not as a benign information provider, but a Big Brother like monitor of all online movements. Criticism of Google’s “Don’t Be Evil” moral code has also begun, with the company’s current leadership of the search field making it a talk point for the whole industry. Gaming contextual advertising is also an increasing problem, with click fraud and spam blogs on the rise, clogging search results with poor quality websites. Each of the engines is working flat out to find ways to counter these emergent problems, and no doubt as they deliver solutions, a whole new set of crises will arise.

Where Google goes next is not a question that Battelle has a very satisfactory answer to. It has been seen recently that the company is adding a variety of features, some of which are not directly related to search, although Google’s search capability is often usefully employed in them (e.g., Gmail). Some haven’t worked particularly well (Google Web Accelerator), some do very well (Picasa), others could do better (Google Desktop Search), some have raised concerns about Google controlling the world (Gmail), others have raised alarm bells about copyright (the Google Print programme). In other words, the development of things beyond search seems somewhat haphazard, and there needs to be some introspection in this direction.

Battelle is engaging and amusing in his commentary about the social implications of search. He raises important questions and issues that we should all be thinking about, whether we are involved with search professionally or are just casual users of search engines. He turns over unturned stones and makes connections that are occasionally surprising - even for a reader who has been an active observer of the industry over the years. This book is unputdownable for sure in its objective.

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